



THE  
**TUNNEL**  
OF  
**DREAMS**



**BERNARD BECKETT**

'Escape into this absorbing magical adventure from a master storyteller.' Kate Constable

# 1

## THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

**A**S FAR AS they could tell, Arlo and Stefan Feeney were entirely normal boys. They lived in a normal house, with two reasonably normal parents, and each morning they walked together to their most normal of schools. Probably, if you'd asked them, they would have told you their futures would be normal too: normal jobs, normal holidays, normal friends and growing slowly, normally old, the way most people did. Neither of them could have guessed just how very un-normal their lives were about to become.

Later they would understand there had been clues. Like the deserted house halfway down their street, with trees growing over the roof and branches

reaching out through broken windows, and a roof that rusted and sagged its way down to the tops of the bulging, flaky walls. Ghosts lived in that house, other children said and walked past it with their heads down and their footsteps quickening. But Arlo and Stefan always lingered, staring hopefully into the darkened windows, as if the house was calling to them.

And then there was their ability to finish each other's sentences, or tell, just from a glance, what the other was thinking. 'It's just cos we're used to each other.' Arlo would shrug. Stefan would nod and say nothing.

Most telling of all, in hindsight, were the dreams. Every month, when the moon was full, without fail, the brothers would dream the same dream. They found themselves in a dark tunnel, moving towards a thin slit of light, from which there came a strong cool wind that filled the passageway with a sound like a song of mourning. As they got closer to the light, the sound grew louder and the wind pushed ever harder against them. And every time, just as they were about to reach the light, they woke. But life is full of the unlikely and the unexplained, and mostly it means nothing at all. It wasn't until the night Arlo

woke with a strange certainty that he should look out his window and saw a flash of torchlight further down the hill that things began to change.

‘What are you looking at?’ Stefan asked, half-asleep.

The boys had shared a room for as long as they could remember and each one was acutely sensitive to the movements of the other.

‘There’s a light,’ said Arlo.

‘There are a lot of lights,’ Stefan answered from the bunk below, but nevertheless Arlo heard him crawl to the window end of his bed.

‘Which light?’ Stefan asked.

‘It’s not there anymore. It was just a single flash.’

‘You woke me for that?’

‘I didn’t wake you.’

‘Well I’m awake.’

‘I didn’t wake you deliberately,’ Arlo said.

‘Could have been anything,’ Stefan told him. ‘Car, train, bike, asteroid.’

‘It was a torch.’

‘Here?’ Stefan’s voice sharpened. They’d read enough mystery stories to imagine an intruder lurking in the bushes.

‘No, further away. Halfway down the road.’ Arlo paused dramatically, before repeating the crucial word. ‘Halfway.’

‘You mean, the...?’

Arlo nodded. ‘Torchlight, from inside the haunted house.’

There was silence as Stefan processed this information. They both waited for the other to say it.

‘Do you dare me to go down and see what it is?’ Stefan finally asked.

‘I double dare you,’ Arlo replied. ‘I’m coming too. What’s the time?’

He heard Stefan rolling over to look at his clock.

‘It’s eleven thirty.’

‘Mum and Dad’ll be asleep. Let’s go.’



The boys hurried down the familiar street, keeping to the shadows, zigzagging to avoid the streetlights. Stefan crouched beneath an overhanging macrocarpa branch and waved his brother forward. They knew better than to carry torches. On a night like this, with a heavy gibbous moon just days away from being full, a torch would only advertise their presence.

A little of Arlo's bravery leaked out of them when they arrived at the abandoned house. Where the rest of the street felt safe and tidy—lawns mown, trees trimmed and curtains pulled snug against the autumn air—this house seemed suddenly sinister. Although the boys had explored its interior before, that had been in the bright light of day, when dark shadows weren't falling across the crumbling walls, and the windows didn't appear so depthless, black and deathly. Stefan too had paused, although, as always, he was pretending nothing worried him.

'You go first,' Arlo whispered in his brother's ear. 'I'll follow.' He felt Stefan take his hand and squeeze it once, firm and certain.

'No. We die together,' said Stefan. It was meant to be a joke, but Arlo's stomach lurched. However this adventure ended, something told him it wasn't going to be simple.

Stefan dropped to the ground and crawled, commando-style, beneath the unkempt bushes, through weeds and vines, over plastic milk bottles, faded soft-drink cans and chip wrappers. Arlo followed close, remembering too late that there were blackberries. A thorn scraped the back of his leg, drawing

a thin beaded line of blood. He didn't call out in pain. He was too nervous for that and, despite the fearful pounding of his heart, too excited.

'We're here,' Stefan whispered. They shuffled forward to the base of a rotten wall. Stefan stood up. 'Okay, in the window.'

None of the windows on the road side of the house had any glass in it. It had been that way as long as either boy could remember.

'Who goes first?'

'You,' Stefan answered.

Arlo saw now that it was a mistake to have asked. He took a deep breath, muttered, 'I'm too young to die,' and hauled himself up through the window frame.

He landed inside with a dusty thud. The room was dark and smelled of rotting leaves and mushrooms.

'Are you all right?' Stefan whispered.

'Yes, hurry.'

Stefan climbed through the window and they stood and listened to the strange sounds of the neglected house, trying to make out shapes in the gloom.

The shadowed room slowly revealed itself as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. Nothing had changed

since they were last here. A sofa faced an ancient, square box television set; armchairs stood on either side, like sentries. On the wall to the boys' right, a mosaic of family photographs hung silent and neglected. At their feet, beneath a layer of garden debris, was carpet. Although it was too dark to make them out, Arlo could tell that cobwebs grew thick all around, tangled white forests alive with spiders. He shuddered at the thought.

'There's nobody here,' Stefan said, surprised by the loudness of his voice.

'But I saw a light,' Arlo reminded him.

'Perhaps it was somebody just looking around, like we are.'

Stefan was ready to suggest they climb back out the window and return to the warmth of their beds, but a sudden noise kept the words in his throat: a thump, followed by a shuffle, and then silence. The kind of thump when you knock something you didn't mean to knock, the kind of shuffle that you make when you move to catch it before it hits the floor. The kind of silence that happens when you stand perfectly still, listening for clues that somebody has heard you.

It was one of those moments where you either push

forward or you turn and run, one of those decisions that changes everything. Arlo nodded in the direction of the only door. Stefan was already moving. Arlo stayed close behind. The room seemed to have become darker. Perhaps the moon had slipped behind a cloud; maybe it was just the heightened sense of danger. Stefan held the door handle and looked back. He took a deep breath. Arlo clenched his fists. Slowly, carefully, Stefan opened the door.

There was a click, and light flooded out of the room, so bright that Arlo felt a pain behind his squinting eyes. Overhead, a dazzling white light bulb hung from the ceiling.

‘Why did you turn that on?’ Arlo demanded.

‘Better question,’ his brother replied. ‘Why is the electricity still connected in an abandoned house?’

They were in the kitchen, but it felt as if they had moved into a different world. There was no dust, no sign of even a single cobweb. Arlo looked carefully around for a clue as to what might have made the noise, but there was nothing. Just a stove and bench, a small fridge, a table and two chairs. At the far end of the room, against the wall was a beanbag, with a thick grey blanket thrown on top. And that was all.

Stefan swung open a cupboard. ‘Look at this.’

The shelves were stacked with the kind of food you might buy if cooking was a problem. Tins of spaghetti, packets of biscuits, boxes of weetbix and muesli bars. There was even a large bag of fruit bursts, all of it unopened. The shelves were as tidy as the room itself.

‘What do you think it is?’ Arlo whispered.

‘Food,’ Stefan replied. Even in times like this, he couldn’t help trying to be funny.

‘You’re really annoying,’ Arlo told him.

‘I know. There’s no one here.’

‘So what was the noise?’

‘Maybe they climbed out the window,’ Stefan suggested, but the only window was high and small, and latched from the inside.

Something tingled along Arlo’s spine. Something about this place wasn’t right. He turned to his brother, about to speak, and then it happened. The blanket rose up from the beanbag like a ghost and came straight at them, making the sound of a frothing, snarling animal.

The boys had both agreed that no matter what happened in the haunted house, they would not

scream. They knew things were rarely made better by screaming.

Arlo screamed. Stefan screamed. Stefan leaped to the left, Arlo to the right, leaving a clear path between them for the runaway blanket. A blanket with legs, and a shape suspiciously like a head under it.

Just in time, Stefan collected his thoughts and grabbed the blanket. This halted the blanket's progress, but not that of the small figure beneath it, which kept running. Arlo scrambled to his feet, racing after it into the dusty room. The stranger hurdled an overturned coffee table and rushed towards the window. Arlo followed, leaping onto one of the armchairs and then springing off it like a diver, fingers outstretched before him. He managed to grasp the escaper's bare feet, just as they leapt through the window.

His captive struggled madly and, if Stefan hadn't arrived in time to grab a handful of shirt, may well have wriggled free.

'It's all right. We don't want to hurt you,' Stefan said.

The movement stopped. When the stranger spoke its voice was even smaller and lighter than the body it came from. 'You've already hurt me, just by coming

here,' it said. 'Let me go, so I can climb back in.'

Arlo looked to Stefan and Stefan nodded. Arlo let go of the feet and stood back, bouncing on the balls of his feet, ready to give chase if he needed to.

The stranger rolled slowly forward, for a moment disappearing. Then a young girl's head popped up above the windowsill. Her hair was long and tangled; her eyes were dark and full of suspicion. She was no older than they were—eleven, twelve at the most—that much was obvious. Arlo was about to ask what she was doing in the house, but she beat him to the question.

'Who are you?'

'I'm Arlo. This is Stefan.'

The girl looked from one boy to the other, and back again. Her eyes widened.

'Are, you...Did Mr Williams send you here?'

The boys tried to think of anyone they knew who might be called Mr Williams, but both drew a blank. 'We've never heard of a Mr Williams,' Stefan answered for both of them. He often did this. It drove Arlo nuts but this wasn't the time for complaining.

'But you're...'. The girl's face scrunched up in concentration as she looked at them both more closely.

She climbed back through the window and stood before them, head cocked to one side, a smile spreading across her tilted face.

‘You’re identical, aren’t you? You’re identical twins.’

‘Yes,’ Stefan confirmed. ‘We are. I’m older, by fifteen minutes.’

‘And I’m funnier,’ Arlo said, as he always did in this situation. He didn’t know if it was true, but it annoyed his brother and that was good enough for him.

The girl, now that she was standing in front of them, was even shorter than he’d thought. Her feet were bare and she was dressed in dark trackpants and a grey hoodie.

‘Who are you?’ Stefan asked.

The girl hesitated. ‘Wait a moment,’ she said. She slid past them and switched off the light. The room deepened into shadows.

‘You can sit down if you want to,’ the girl said, pointing at one of the dusty chairs.

‘No, I’m all right standing,’ Stefan replied. Arlo moved to a seat and lowered himself onto its grimy cushion. The girl didn’t move. She had the look of a stray cat: hungry but distrustful, one eye always on the exit.

‘What’s your name?’ Stefan asked her.

‘Alice,’ the girl replied.

‘And what are you doing here?’

‘I live here.’

‘By yourself?’ Arlo asked.

The girl nodded and looked at the floor. The question had made her sad.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—’

‘No, it’s all right.’ She shook her head quickly, as if to straighten its contents. ‘Does anybody know you’re here?’

A cloud moved past the moon, and she was bathed in a cool white glow. Her eyes were filmed with tears. She searched their faces carefully for the truthfulness of their reply.

‘No.’

‘Why are you here?’

‘We saw a torchlight, in the window. We wanted to know where it was from.’

‘That could have been dangerous,’ the girl said. ‘What if I was a murderer, hiding from the police?’

‘We’re not scared of murderers,’ Stefan lied. His bravado sounded ridiculous, but the girl didn’t laugh. Instead she nodded seriously and muttered ‘good’

under her breath. Then she looked up, her head steady, her eyes firm with a new decision.

‘All right then, identical twins. Seeing as you are not easily frightened I have a favour to ask you. It won’t be easy, but you might just be the only people who can help me. The only people who can save my sister.’

Arlo looked at Stefan, waiting for him to speak, but his mouth hung silently open.

‘Ah.’ Arlo spoke softly, frightened that if he gave the wrong answer, Alice might cry. She had that look about her, that special kind of electricity that sparks about a person when hope and desperation collide. ‘We’d like to help but we can’t stay out too late. We have school in the morning.’

‘Not tonight,’ Alice said. ‘Two nights from now. Saturday night.’

‘What do you need us to do.’ Stefan had found his voice.

The girl shook her head. ‘If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me. You have to see. I have to show you.’

‘Why Saturday night?’ Stefan asked.

Arlo was surprised his brother hadn’t already

guessed. 'It's because it's a full moon isn't it?' he said.

Alice nodded. She didn't ask how it was he had known. Arlo got the feeling it would take a lot to surprise her. 'Yes, the tunnel only opens on a full moon.'

The boys turned to one another. There was no need for words. The moon. The tunnel. The dreams. There was no way it was a coincidence.

'Okay,' Stefan said. 'We'll come back on Saturday.'

'We promise,' Arlo added.

They were too tired for talking when they got home that night, and fell asleep immediately. The next morning they had to be called on three times before they would stir from their beds. It wasn't until they were safely alone, walking once again past the dilapidated house, that either dared speak of what had happened.

'Do you think we should tell someone?' Arlo asked.

'No, definitely not.'

'And we should definitely meet Alice tomorrow night?' Arlo asked.

Stefan considered the broken house before them. By daylight it looked smaller and sadder, far less

frightening. If he let himself think about it any longer he might even believe he'd made the whole episode up, that it had been another of their strange dreams.

'Hardly seems real, does it?' Arlo said, piggybacking on his thoughts.

'Nah.'

'But it is,' Arlo whispered.

'Yeah, it is.'

'Hello boys!' The sudden loud voice made both boys jump, exactly as the speaker had intended. They turned to see a tall figure they both recognised, standing as straight and thin as the lamppost beside him, his proud chin jutting up and outward so that he had to look down his long nose to see them. Mike McGuinness. He was fourteen or fifteen, old enough to be able to cause them trouble if he wanted to. He was always keenly aware of his surroundings. Arlo's friend Josie said he looked like a bird of prey, sitting on a wire, looking down at the world, alert to the smallest disturbance. Not that Mike McGuinness was looking for food. It was something else that interested him, or maybe everything else.

'Strange old house, eh?' Mike said. 'Never been in there myself.'

Mike waited and when no one replied he took half a step forward and peered closer into the twins' faces. 'How about you boys?'

It was either a trap or a coincidence. Whatever the case, Arlo could feel his heart thumping wildly, and he knew that looking and sounding natural was going to be impossible, whatever he replied. So he stayed quiet and hoped his brother, who everybody agreed was the more accomplished liar, would save him.

'It's not that strange, actually,' Stefan offered. 'An old woman lived there and when she died her children couldn't agree on how to split the proceeds so one of them blocked it being sold. That's all.'

'Oh,' Mike said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, as if playing the villain in a bad school production. 'I didn't know that. So you have been inside?'

'Sure,' Stefan replied, not so much as blinking. 'Last summer. We dared each other to spend the night in there, but the mosquitoes drove us out. You're not missing much. It's just an old house, and it smells sort of bad.'

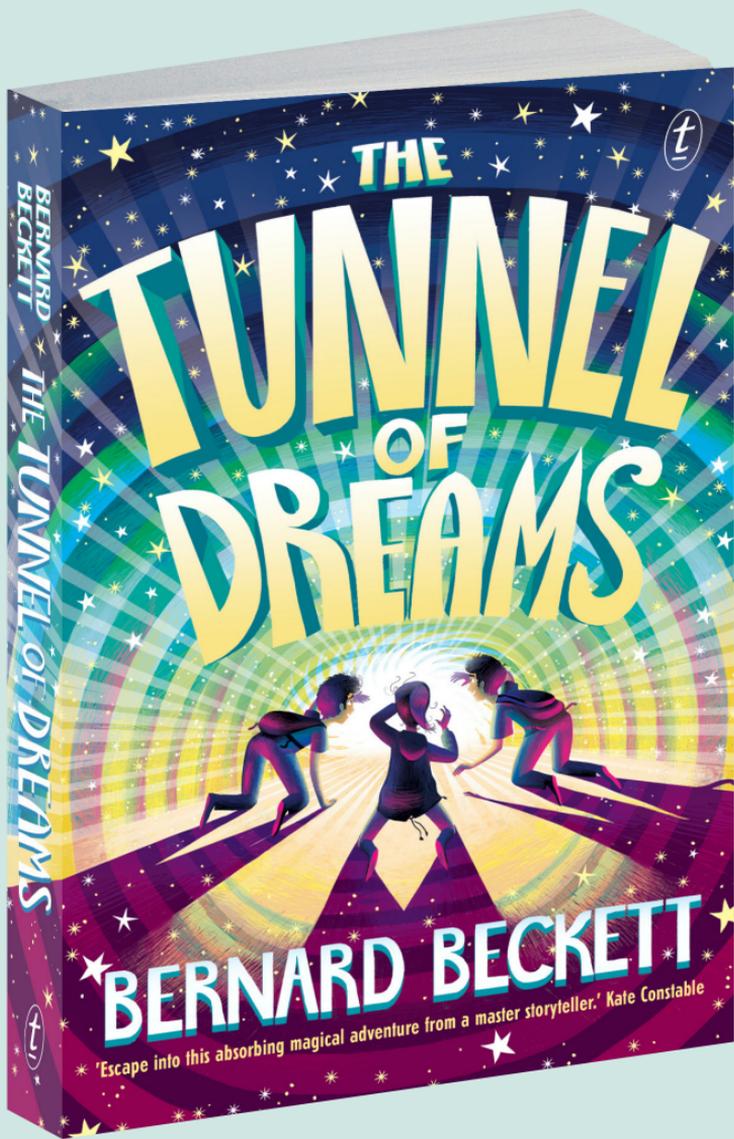
'Okay.' Mike seemed satisfied with this and straightened, turning his head and scanning the rest of the street. Just like an owl. 'See you later then.'

He clicked his heels in a military fashion and turned self-importantly down the road.

The boys watched him walk away.

‘You did that really well, Stefan,’ Arlo told him.

‘I hope so,’ his brother answered.



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